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A Professional Narrative

When I was a child my favorite teacher was my mother. With no professional training, education, or certification, she managed to teach me to color within the lines, tie my shoes, catch butterflies in a net, work hard and play fair. I guess that was her idea of a balanced curriculum. I was always encouraged by my mother to try hard and work at improving...yet I was never judged by her. She never told me that I was below average at coloring and above average at playing fair. She just taught me the things that a child would love and allowed me to learn.

As I grew a bit older and began my formal education in a school system, I realized that learning wasn't the safe environment I once thought it to be. I began to be labeled by my learning. I became a “B” student in history, a “C” student in math, an “A” student in science, a labeled student in the classroom. I began to really know what my labels meant, and sadly, I could see the labels of my classmates as well. Dennis hated science—he was a “C.” Johnny hated penmanship—he was a “D.” I began to dislike subjects that I couldn't perform well in...couldn't learn well in and so did the other students. When that happened, the labels actually began to fit and became “almost” deserved.

I look back now and wonder why my teachers allowed this to happen. Understand, I don't blame them, *per se*, blame being a vicious ugly word, but I do question them. Why allow this to happen to a student? In fact, I'm quite sure that I'm not the only student this has ever happened to—so why allow it to happen to most students? Exactly how does a group of young children, five to seven years old, who love learning, who love school, become young adults that praise snow days and count the minutes until school is over? Something in this process goes horribly wrong. To me, the answer

revolves around our labels, our grades. Tell students they are bad at something long enough, no matter your motives, and you will convince them it is the truth. Blame the students...they're slow, they're dumb, they don't put forth any effort...and why should anyone care? He's a "C." His brother was a "C." His parents were both "C's." It's in his blood.

When I became still older, and entered high school, I began meeting teachers who would help transform my life. Some teachers actually didn't believe in labels—they were forced to use them, but never accepted them. These teachers allowed me a chance to learn again, without making me feel the failure for my grades. These teachers saved me from a life I would have regretted. No matter what grades did to my psyche, I always loved to learn things when I could be part of the process. Learning, in that style, in that method, just me and a book, a paper, something...seemed so much more authentic than when I was told to memorize, memorize, memorize and then perform on a multiple choice test. It was then, while still learning who I was to become, who I really wanted to be, what life could hold, that I learned that "learning" in the most real sense, seldom happens in the cage of a classroom.

Still later in my life, well into my third year of college, I held dreams that said there would be nothing better to fill my days than becoming a teacher. A "real" teacher. I studied pedagogy, read theories, battled stereotypes and learned of more and more battles that were waged in our classrooms daily. I began to meet professors who were like the few shining teachers I had in high school, valuing learning over grading. I realized then that these few people, whom I developed such a deep sense of personal and professional respect for, were fighting the good fight—perhaps not winning, but it was the fight itself that mattered.

Now, as an adjunct instructor at Mid Michigan Community College, I have picked up my proverbial helmet and gun and joined in on the action. I stare into the faces of my students on the first day of every semester and see them wrapped up tightly in their labels. I see the young man in the back row who feels he is nothing but a "C" student. I see the students who have been judged lacking time

and time again, wondering what they are doing in a college classroom. I see labels wrapped so tightly that they almost suffocate the students who sit within them. And in the next sixteen weeks...I make confetti. Every assumption, every label, every bad grade ever received, I shred. I tear apart grading systems. I point fingers, scream at the top of my lungs and remove the blame from the shoulders of my students and throw it back into the educational system where it was found. I do my very best to show my students how to value themselves again. I scream at them, "BE PROUD OF YOUR IDEAS!" and "IT'S YOUR OPINION THAT MATTERS!" And while they may fight this "different" view of education I paint for them, I don't give up. I'll never give up. I can't...because that's who I am as a professional.

About two years ago my first daughter, Hannah, was born. I stood in the delivery room draped in a sterile blue gown with matching facemask and hairnet, and for the first time in my life I really knew that I was on the right track. You see, someday soon, with all my professional training, education, and certificates...I'll have to teach my daughter to color within the lines, tie her shoes, catch butterflies in a net, work hard and play fair. Because grading doesn't matter, power doesn't matter, when compared to the importance of our children, our students, and their learning. Learning matters. Students matter. The rest...well, it's just details. And that's my idea of a "professionally" balanced curriculum.